

# Brown bullhead catfish

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## Species Description

**Scientific name:** *Ameiurus nebulosus*

**AKA:** bullhead, mudcat

**Native to:** North America

**Habitat:** Freshwater; lake or slow moving (often weedy) river. Can tolerate poor water conditions.

*Ameiurus nebulosus* is a moderate sized catfish, commonly reaching a length of 20-35cm. It has a wide and lengthy large head (25% of total body length), with small protruding eyes. Tail is straight or with slightly rounded posterior edge. Lips are fleshy but not prominent with 1 pair of long flattened barbels (which is the longest of its 4 pairs). Dorsal (upper) surface of the head and body may be yellow-brown, olive or grey, with sides often mottled with vague brown blotches. The underside of the head and lower jaw are a buttery yellow colour, which pales to a creamy white or pale grey on the belly. All barbels are dark brown or black, except chin barbels which may be white or grey at the base.

Brown bullhead catfish has 1 dorsal fin with soft rays but with a strong leading spine. It has high, broad and rounded pectoral fins, with a barbed heavy spine (spines can be locked in erect position as a defence strategy against predation). It has a small adipose fin, inconspicuous pelvic fin and long and slender anal fin (which does not reach caudal fin).

*A. nebulosus* has been introduced outside of its native range to a number of countries in Europe, they are not present in Northern Ireland. It was likely spread primarily for angling opportunities. Its ability to survive low oxygen concentrations, its generalist omnivore diet (aided by its chin barbels in turbid waters) and its predation defence (ensuring a lack of native predators) has assisted in its spread and establishment. *A. nebulosus* predate on a wide variety of native invertebrates, small vertebrates and fish eggs.

**As the Brown bullhead catfish is not ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland, under the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 it is offence to release or allow this species to escape into the wild.**

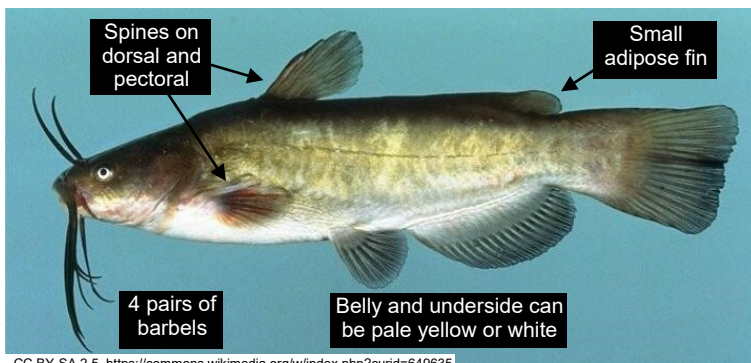


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## Key ID Features



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Chin barbels  
white or  
grey at base

Tail straight or  
slightly rounded  
posterior edge

Sides often  
mottled with  
vague brown  
blotches

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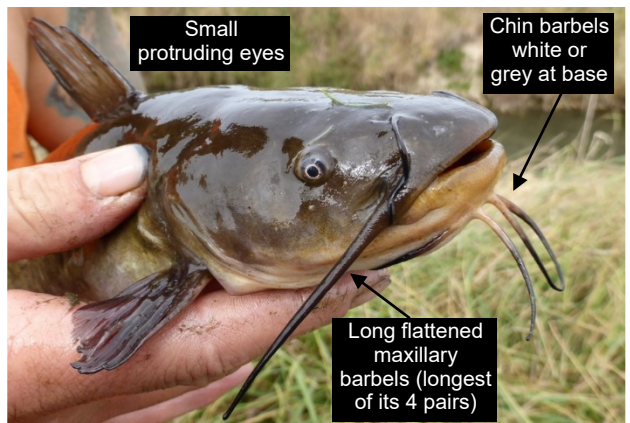
Small  
protruding eyes

Chin barbels  
white or  
grey at base

Darker dorsal  
surface of head  
and body –  
yellow-brown,  
olive or grey

Pectoral fin barbs point  
towards the tail when fins  
are closed against the body.

Long flattened  
maxillary  
barbels (longest  
of its 4 pairs)

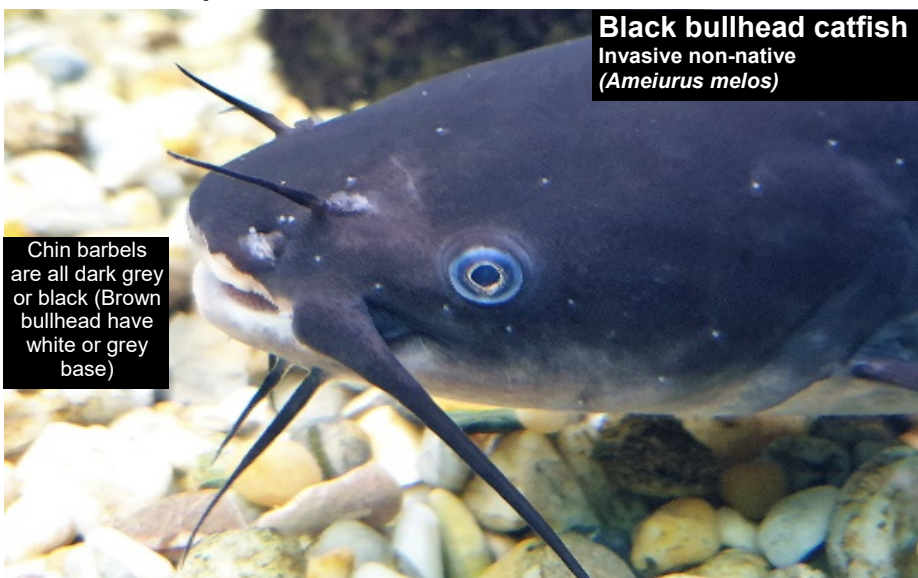


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## Similar Species



**Black bullhead catfish**  
Invasive non-native  
(*Ameiurus melos*)

Chin barbels are all dark grey or black (Brown bullhead have white or grey base)

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Pectoral fin barbs point towards the head when fins are closed against the body (Brown bullhead barbs point towards the tail).

Adipose fin short and free at posterior end

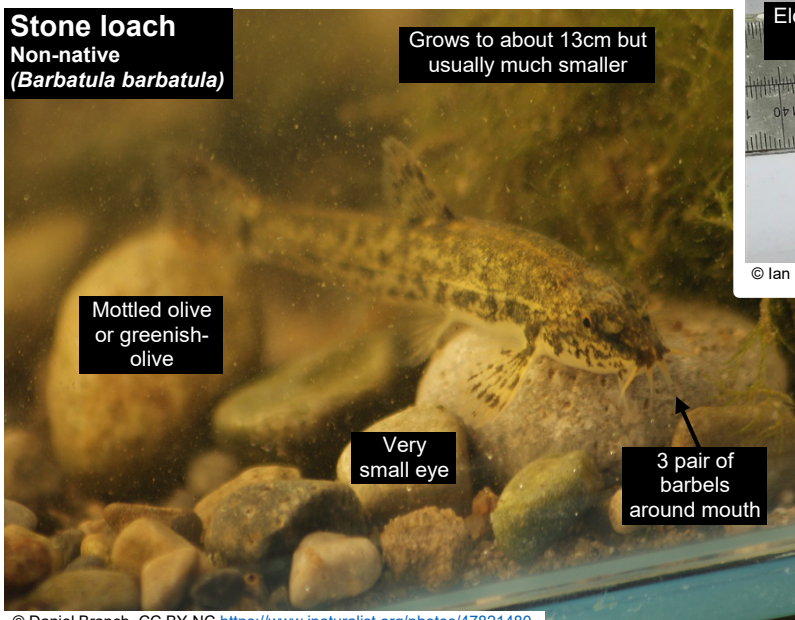
Generally has 17-21 rays on anal fin

Anal fin rays do not reach caudal (tail) fin

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**Stone loach**  
Non-native  
(*Barbatula barbatula*)

Grows to about 13cm but usually much smaller



Mottled olive or greenish-olive

Very small eye

3 pair of barbels around mouth

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## Distribution

Brown bullhead catfish (and all species of the genus of *Ameiurus*) are not present in Northern Ireland. But are well established in a number of central and eastern Europe countries. At least four species of the *Ameiurus* genus are present in Europe (24 European countries have recorded at least one *Ameiurus* sp.) but only two species are widespread, *A. melas* and *A. nebulosus*.



Area between head and dorsal fin is compressible. No bony ridge unlike brown bullhead catfish

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Elongated body

Tail fin square-cut or slightly concave

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## References and further reading:

CABI datasheet *Ameiurus nebulosus* (brown bullhead) available <https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/94468>

Nowak, M., Koščo, J., Paweł, S., Mierzwa-Szymkowiak, D. & Popek, W. (2010). When did the black bullhead, *Ameiurus melas* (Teleostei: Ictaluridae), arrive to Poland?. Archives of Polish Fisheries. 18. 183–186.

Rutkayová, J., Biskup, R., Harant, R., Šlechta, V., & Koščo, J. (2012). *Ameiurus melas* (black bullhead): Morphological characteristics of new introduced species and its comparison with *Ameiurus nebulosus* (brown bullhead). Reviews in Fish Biology and Fisheries. 23.

Zogaris, S. 2017. Information on measures and related costs in relation to species considered for inclusion on the Union list: *Ameiurus* spp. Technical note prepared by IUCN for the European Commission. Available at <https://circabc.europa.eu/sd/a/31fa05d1-ee5c-4919-b2bd-7f1efab8679f/TSSR-2016-003%20Ameiurus.pdf>

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